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ABSTRACT

In February 2000, England's Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) proposed a new degree, called the Foundation Degree, and solicited stakeholder input by publishing a list of 13 questions pertaining to Foundation Degrees. The Further Education Development Agency (FEDA) responded to the DfEE's request for input by responding to all 13 questions. FEDA welcomed the Foundation Degree initiative and positions on a number of issues pertaining to the Foundation Degree, but expressed its view that Foundation Degrees should be designed primarily as vocational awards providing a route to employment for school leavers and those already in employment. Other positions stated by FEDA in its response to the DfEE included the following: (1) higher education level 2 is a suitable level at which to pitch the Foundation Degree overall; (2) Foundation Degrees should be designed initially in broad rather than highly specific occupational areas; (3) the degree should be organized around occupational requirements rather than academic subjects; (4) to avoid diminishing the importance attached to Foundation Degrees, they should require work-based learning rather than work experience; (5) flexible delivery should be a cornerstone of Foundation Degrees; and (6) Foundation Degrees should be funded in the same way and at broadly the same level as comparable higher education courses. (MN)

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Foundation Degrees

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Introduction

1. FEDA welcomes the Foundation Degree initiative[1] and the opportunity to contribute to this consultation exercise.

Unambiguous purpose

2. We believe that the critical issue will be to ensure that the primary purpose of the award is absolutely clear. Our view is that the Foundation Degree should be designed primarily as a vocational award that provides a route to employment and for those in employment. This reflects the needs of the economy and fills a gap in the current system. We believe that the design should be driven by this primary purpose. Other ambitions such as progression to an honours degree should be built from the resulting model and need not distort this overriding purpose.

Clear features

3. We recommend that the Foundation Degree have the following features:

   - It should be designed on the basis of credit targets for occupationally specific skills, as well as generic vocational and key skills. A modular, credit-based structure will support accessibility to the programme and will accommodate variable patterns of attendance, including for people in work.
   - The award should focus on practical experience of the workplace and a substantial number of credits should be achieved through work-based learning.
   - Learners should be able to achieve the credit targets through a range of combinations of study that meet their particular requirements.
   - Tutorial support, guidance, action planning and career planning should underpin learners' programmes – this will be essential to ensure coherence and integration of programmes.
   - Universities and colleges working together should offer learners access to a wide range of existing modules and programmes, rather than developing new and discrete provision for all elements of the programmes. We strongly support the partnership approach between further and higher education, and agree that employer bodies should be influential in shaping the design.

4. We believe that an unambiguous purpose, together with clear features, could ensure that the Foundation Degree is a distinctive and valued new brand.

DfEE questions and FEDA answers

Question 1 Do you agree that Foundation Degrees should be aimed at school leavers and those already in employment?

5. We agree that the Foundation Degree should be aimed at both these groups. We suggest that the term 'school leavers' should be replaced by 'young people leaving full-time education', to make it clear that this encompasses young people leaving college.

Question 2 Do you agree that Foundation Degrees are pitched at the right level in the qualifications ladder?

6. We agree that HE level 2 is a suitable level at which to pitch the award overall. This would mean that the bulk of achievement is at that level, but we would recommend that this should allow some achievement to be above and below level 2. For example, we believe that some achievement at level 3 (say 10 credits) would enhance the Foundation Degree as a route to employment and could facilitate progression to a degree. In addition, some programmes might appropriately include credits at lower levels. For instance, a business programme might include a modern foreign language, which would be at QCA level 1 or 2.

7. We recognise that QCA, colleges and HE institutions take different approaches to credits and levels. For requirements related to level to be rigorous, consistent definition and application are needed. This will aid both clarity and future progression in an area of study. We suggest that consistency in definitions of levels and credits should be explored in detail during the pilots. A single numbering system would help learners, parents and employers to see the ladder of progression.

8. We favour open entry, based on an assessment of the learner's capacity to cope with or benefit from the programme, rather than entry requirement in terms of A-levels or equivalents. Capacity to benefit is used on many programmes aimed at adults, such as Open University degrees and Access to HE programmes. It usually involves a personal interview with an individual to determine if they are suited to a programme.

Question 3 Are there other ways in which to ensure that Foundation Degrees respond to employers' skill needs?

9. We suggest that Foundation Degrees should be designed initially in broad occupational areas rather than highly specific ones. We recognise that the National Training Organisations (NTOs), who are responsible for ensuring that learning provision meets employment needs in their industry sectors, will be key bodies to engage in endorsing the design of Foundation Degrees. However, we also recognise that they do not have the capacity to work with dozens of consortia around the country. An approach that focuses on broad occupational areas could engage NTOs at a national level in determining the broad parameters with local determination of detail to take account of the local employment context as appropriate.

10. Dialogue will be needed at consortium level over the content and delivery modes of Foundation Degree programmes; this is likely to include discussions with local employer organisations and trade unions. Currently, significant provision of specialised vocational courses through HND/HNC takes place in sub-regional colleges rather than regional higher education institutions (HEIs). For these, existing sub-regional employers' panels will need to be involved in the design and development.

11. Foundation Degree consortia will need to take account of the Regional Skills Strategies of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). In addition, local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) will have a responsibility for identifying 'current and future learning and skill priorities'[2] that will need to inform the design of Foundation Degrees.

12. If the Foundation Degree is promoted clearly as a vocational programme primarily aimed at employment, then colleges and universities offering programmes should be expected to indicate how it relates to employment needs in their recruitment materials, referencing this against evidence supplied by RDAs, LSCs and employers. This should be a requirement.

13. As well as ensuring that the Foundation Degree meets employers' needs, it will be important that employers are seen to endorse the award through:

    - using the Foundation Degree in recruitment, training, promotion and remuneration

- periodically contributing to reviews and updating in line with sector changes
- involvement in learning processes through work experience, projects and mentoring.

Question 4 | In which subject areas would it be most valuable to offer Foundation Degrees?

14. A vocational HE qualification will need to be organised around occupational requirements rather than academic subjects. To develop continuous progression in the work-based route, the issue is whether to choose a limited number of broad vocational areas as in GNVQs or a large range of occupationally specific areas. We would support the former option of focusing on broad occupational areas to support clear branding and promotion, with the capacity for specialist options where appropriate.

15. Broadening the scope of vocational programmes at HE level 2, especially in the arts and humanities, is very welcome. This is needed partly to recognise new and growing sectors of the economy such as creative industries, performing arts, arts management, publishing, media and music technology and partly in response to the impact of new technologies – for example, microelectronics, software engineering, multimedia, and intelligent systems.

Question 5 | How can work experience be best integrated into learning outcomes and accredited?

16. The term 'work experience' may diminish the importance attached to this feature of the Foundation Degree. We suggest that the term 'work-based learning' would better describe the model of engagement that needs to be developed. Work-based learning should provide an opportunity for students to apply and demonstrate skills and understanding in a real work context, and should be a requirement for all Foundation Degrees. We suggest that a credit target be agreed (in the order of 80 credits) for achievement through work-based learning. Such experience is vital to establishing the vocational credibility of the award and can also be highly effective in motivating many learners.

17. We agree with the implication of this question that it is the learning outcomes, not the experience itself, that should be accredited. Written reports, reflections and real-life assignments can enable students to demonstrate the outcomes they have achieved or practised in the workplace. These learning outcomes could be related to generic vocational skills, specific key skills or occupationally specific skills. The close engagement of the individual learner's tutor in ensuring that they have appropriate tasks through which to demonstrate their achievements, given both their specific programme and their specific job role or work-based learning, will be essential.

18. As the consultation document makes clear, there is much good practice on which to draw in this area that can inform the pilot studies. However, it must be noted that the effective organisation and management of the work-based learning element of the programme will require detailed planning. For those already in work, systems for accrediting their prior learning will be needed. Collaboration between employers and educators in devising real-life assignments, of benefit to the employing organisation and the learner, will assist this process and help to cement local relationships.

Question 6 | Do you agree that more clarity is needed amongst HE qualifications below honours degree level?

19. Yes. We agree that the existing range of qualifications is extremely confusing, even to those working in the field of education and training. Another qualification should not be simply added. FEDA has found the recent work by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) on classifying sub-degree qualifications into broad categories and also on developing a National Qualifications Framework at HE levels useful. Development of a single framework of numerical levels from QCA level 1 through to Masters level is needed to bring clarity to the existing system.

20. If existing qualifications below honours degree level are to co-exist with the Foundation Degree then arrangements must allow for their relationship to the Foundation Degree to be clear; for example, it should be agreed how they might contribute credit towards the Foundation Degree.

21. The relationship with professional body qualifications requires careful consideration, to enable both entry from the Foundation Degree to professional qualifications and to enable other professional qualifications to give credit towards a Foundation Degree. The relationship between the Foundation Degree and HNC and HND qualifications also needs consideration. We would recommend that initially these programmes be recognised as giving advanced standing or credit towards the Foundation Degree and that their position be reviewed over time.

Question 7 Are there additional features that can be built into the Foundation Degree so as to widen access and reach out to the widest cross-section of students?

22. Further education colleges have been developing ways of widening access, particularly in recent years, which provide a basis of experience and some evidence about approaches that work. Building from this experience, we suggest the following:

- Flexibility in delivery, using a mix of evening, weekend, part-time day release, block release, Internet and other distance learning approaches, will be needed to reach different sub-groups.
- The language used to describe units, credits, levels and assessment methods needs to be common across all Foundation Degrees and, as far as possible, GNVQ, Advanced Modern Apprenticeships and Access to HE courses. The variations in terminology make it difficult for learners, parents and employers to understand the progression opportunities open to them.
- The rate at which units or credits are accumulated should suit the learner's circumstances, not be designed for a specified endpoint after two or three years. Pressures at the workplace or home can lead to drop-out if the rate of credit accumulation is fixed.
- Modular and credit-based arrangements will be helpful in enabling learners to vary the pace and intensity of their programmes where work or domestic circumstances require this.
- Successful approaches to widening access require learners to be effectively supported once they are recruited. A strong tutorial element to the programme will be essential to provide ongoing support to learners.
- Enabling work-based delivery of programmes could widen access, although we are aware that sometimes learners do not wish their employer to know that they are enrolled on courses. Therefore care will be needed in handling the relationship between the employer and the learner. Employer sponsorship schemes for both existing and potential employees could enhance employer involvement in some cases.
- In some situations, delivery on employers' premises will be appropriate. Consideration will need to be given to corporate university experience in this, and collaborations between colleges and companies. Work-based modules delivered in the workplace can lead to peer support groups among employees.
- Accreditation of prior experience and learning will be an important component of entry to the qualification in addition to the standard QCA level 3 routes.
- Taking courses to the learners in their community is an effective way of reaching those who traditionally have not participated in education. The Foundation Degree could be delivered in a variety of locations outside the workplace or college.
- A potential benefit of consortia delivering Foundation Degrees is that learners could have access to provision offered by a number of providers, in order to follow the programme that most appropriately meets their needs. Therefore learners may wish to move between institutions to get the best fit with their needs. As mentioned earlier, strong tutorial and career support systems will need to be in place to underpin the flexible curriculum that could be offered.
- Examination of progression routes into the Foundation Degree for Modern Apprentices could create more flexible pathways and support continuity in occupational sectors.

Question 8 Foundation Degrees will provide a base from which progression to an honours degree requires only one-and-a-third years of full-time study: what are the optimum progression arrangements to the first degree?

23. While FEDA welcomes the intention to enable learners to progress to an honours degree, it is important that this does not overshadow the primary purpose of progression to employment.

24. Given the variety of potential Foundation Degrees and honours degree destinations, we recommend that a notion of the study time required for conversion from one to the other should be regarded as indicative and should not be rigidly applied. We anticipate that highly customised programmes will be required to enable progression, and these should be devised individually if necessary.

25. We do not believe that a standard one-and-a-third years of additional full-time study will be appropriate. The design of the bridge from Foundation to honours degree will need to accommodate employees on part-time programmes as well as full-time learners. A summer school is unlikely to be suitable for all.

26. Transfer from a college to a university site to complete an honours degree may be unattractive for some potential learners, either for transport or cultural reasons. For some groups, where possible, top-up provision should be located at the same site as the Foundation Degree.

27. There will need to be consistent and continuing dialogue with learners intending to progress to honours level about academic expectations, through tutors, mentors, and guidance and support systems across the HE and FE providers. This is particularly important if students wish to move to a different HE Institution.

Question 9 Do you agree that Foundation Degrees should be awarded by universities and HE colleges with degree awarding powers working in collaboration with FE colleges?

28. On balance, we believe that universities should award Foundation Degrees. Some FE colleges are currently accredited by HEIs to award higher level qualifications. Colleges where they are the major delivery partner and are accredited by an HEI should award Foundation Degrees. Under this model the HEI retains the responsibility for accrediting the college Quality Assurance (QA) arrangements.

29. An alternative that could be explored would be to extend the procedures in place for recognition of Access courses. This has been very successful in securing a collaborative approach between further and higher education and has focused attention on supporting and extending best practice. We would support further consideration of this option.

30. Colleges may need to be involved with more than one HE partner to cover their curriculum offer. This possibility should not be excluded. Experience of FE–HE consortium working suggests that mutual respect for the different cultures, aims, purposes and incentive structures in the different sectors will be necessary to ensure effective working between the two sectors. There is now widespread experience of effective partnership arrangements.

31. Many differing QA systems already operate in colleges and will continue to do so under the LSC. New arrangements should ensure that the administration of quality assurance is not unduly burdensome and does not stifle innovation.

Question 10 What should be the appropriate balance of provision between part-time and full-time Foundation Degree programmes?

32. It would not be appropriate to predetermine the balance of part-time and full-time. With a unit-based approach, credits will be accumulated at a pace that suits the learner and the employer, and there need be no clear-cut distinction between full and part time. This is already the case in the Open University. We believe that modes of delivery should be demand-led and allow learners to move between full- and part-time study as suits their purposes and circumstances.

33. For planning purposes, we anticipate from HND and HNC experience that the demand for part-time provision at local level is, in the first instance, likely to be greater than for full-time. The popularity of full-time provision depends partly on the cost and time of travel to a local HEI, as many of the harder-to-reach participants prefer not to live away from home for financial reasons.

Question 11 How can we promote the flexible delivery of Foundation Degrees?

34. Points about flexibility have been made in section 7. In summary:

- Flexibility of start dates, point of delivery, and modes of delivery of teaching and assessment will be particularly important if new kinds of learners, particularly employees, are to be attracted.
- The exploitation of online learning, online assessment, work-based modules, and learndirect, will be particularly valuable.

Question 12 Do you agree that the quality of the Foundation Degree will be safeguarded by the criteria agreed by the Design Group?

35. It is difficult to anticipate whether the criteria will safeguard quality before they are known. However, to increase the likelihood of this we suggest:

- It would be desirable for criteria to be framed in such a way as to encourage specialist roles to be taken up within consortia by the parties with greatest expertise. For example, work-based learning and assessment at work might be led by employers; learner and learning support and guidance by colleges; progression to honours degrees by HEIs.

- Different aspects of the quality assurance arrangements will need to be shared out among the consortium members, QAA, professional bodies and any potential awarding bodies whose awards could offer credit towards the Foundation Degree (for example, Edexcel, the National Open College Network).

Question 13 Do you have views on funding, including a link to employment outcomes?

36. FEDA agrees that Foundation Degrees should be funded in the same way, and at broadly the same level as comparable HE courses through the standard Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) method. Account needs to be taken, however, of the extra costs involved in developing and maintaining close links with industry. Experience of other sectors suggests that the quality of placements and the strength of the links between work-based learning and education-based experiences are critical to the success of vocational programmes. Such links are very demanding of staff time.

37. We would advise caution in offering funding incentives to providers for students progressing into jobs for three main reasons:

    - If progression to an honours degree is one of the planned outcomes of the programme, it seems wrong to discriminate against it in funding terms. The decision whether or not to continue on the honours route should be made impartially in the best interests of the student.
    - There are many operational difficulties in deciding what kind of employment outcome would count. Would part-time work, temporary work, or work at a menial level count? Would work unrelated to the area of study be acceptable – and if not, how close would the relationship have to be? Would promotion for those already in work count?
    - Success in finding work, or appropriate work, is heavily affected by fluctuations in the labour market and is very local. A premium in respect of those students who are successful in achieving the planned learning outcomes of a course focuses providers on those issues that are most directly under the course team's control.

38. There is considerable experience in the FE and work-based training sectors of the impact of linking resources to outcomes. It is now generally accepted that while a modest premium, of the order of 10% of funding, linked to student achievement can have positive effects, the substantially higher proportions applied in some parts of the TEC sector had distorting and negative effects on providers' practice. It can act to limit access from those candidates not judged to be a 'safe bet'.

39. The vocational focus of Foundation Degrees raises issues about the extent to which employers ought to make a financial contribution, particularly to the costs of part-time study. To the extent that programmes are narrowly focused on the immediate needs of *employers*, the argument for a contribution is stronger. To the extent that they are more broadly focused on the requirements of *employment* in broad occupational areas, the argument is weaker. FEDA believes that the interests of learners, and ultimately employers, will be best served by a broader focus, and therefore believes that Foundation Degrees should attract the same proportion of public subsidy as other degree programmes.

40. This principle, however, should not prevent appropriate units that may have been provided at the request of an employer and paid for by an employer being recognised as credit towards a degree.

Notes

1. Proposals for the Foundation Degree are set out in *Foundation Degrees: a consultation document*, published by the DfEE on 15 February 2000. The document is published on the DfEE's website (www.dfee.gov.uk).
2. *The Learning and Skills Council prospectus*. DfEE, 1999.

Further information

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In February 2000, the DfEE published *Foundation Degrees: a consultation document*. Section 5 of the document set out a number of questions about the new award and welcomed feedback about the new proposals. This paper gives FEDA's response to the questions posed in the consultation document.

feda responds

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